DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 947 PS 024 267

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TITLE Even Start Parents' Practices and Views of Literacy.
SPONS AGENCY Monongalia County Board of Education, Morgantown, W. Va.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Family Environment; *Family Influence; *Literacy; Parent Role; *Parents as Teachers; Preschool Education; Qualitative Research; *Reading Skills; *Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS *Even Start

ABSTRACT

The family's influence on children's learning accounts for 80 percent of variance in students' academic performance. The present study, framed by the concept of human development within ecological contexts as elaborated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), investigated literacy practices and views of parents with limited literacy skills who participated in a home-based Even Start program. The program was implemented in a small city in the Appalachian region of the United States. The subjects were five parents--three mothers and two fathers--from three families of low socioeconomic status as determined by family income. Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews of parents and Even Start staff, observations of Even Start home visits and of parent-child storybook sharing, parent responses to hypothetical learning situations, and results of the HOME Screening Questionnaire. The results indicated that all parents valued education for themselves and their children. The parents realized to a certain degree that they had an influence on their children's learning. However, they needed the encouragement and clarification of the benefits of their efforts and of their role as teachers. The Even Start program has helped each of the parents to gain confidence and expand their repertoire of activities to promote literacy. Contains 16 references. (MOK)

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ED 397 947

Even Start Parents' Practices and Views of Literacy

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Paper presented at American Educational Research Conference

New York, April 10, 1996

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PS 024267

This research was funded by a grant from the Monongalia County School District, Morgantown, West Virginia.

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Even Start Parents' Practices and Views of Literacy

Diane Karther

The family's influence on children's learning has been investigated for several decades. Ever since Coleman and colleagues (1966) found that family variables account for 80% of variance in student achievement scores, researchers have endeavored to discover specific variables in the family environment that affect student performance. A family variable that is frequently correlated to school achievement is the educational level of the mother. Mothers who have not completed high school may have children at greater risk for early school failure and high school dropout. Although lower educational and socioeconomic levels may limit parents' abilities to provide a learning environment for their children, researchers emphasize that family practices are better predictors of children's school achievement than demographic descriptors (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

A specific family activity, that of literacy, has been correlated to children's reading achievement (Durkin, 1966, Hess et. al, 1982, Snow, 1983 and Teale, 1986). After examination of research on emergent literacy, Glazer and Burke (1994) conclude that: 1) children brought up in literate environments begin to learn to read and write before formal schooling, 2) reading and writing are learned simultaneously, 3) literacy develops in real

situations, in functional settings, and 4) reading to children is an essential part of their learning to read and write.

Parents with poorly developed literacy skills may find it difficult to provide literacy experiences for their preschool-aged children. They may lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to take full advantage of learning opportunities in the home. As with other types of parenting skills, it is crucial to intervene in the preschool period to promote family literacy to prevent later reading and school problems (Spiegel,1994).

The present study investigated literacy practices and views of parents with limited literacy skills who participated in a home-based Even Start program in a small city in the Appalachian region of the United States. Specific parental views included those about education and their role as teacher of their children. The study examined informal emergent literacy experiences in the home and family bookreading. The short-term effects of Even Start intervention were included in the study.

The study was framed with the concept of human development within ecological contexts as elaborated by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The family is a primary context within which development occurs. Vygotsky's emphasis of the importance of social contexts and the contention that the development of higher-order thinking is mediated by human interaction and by cultural tools such as speech and literacy also guided the study (1962, 1987).

Method

A qualitative case study approach was used to develop an in-

depth description of parents' views and to reveal a range of family literacy practices. Data consisted of semi-structured interviews of parents and Even Start staff, observations of Even Start home visits and of parent-child storybook sharing, parent responses to hypothetical learning situations and results of the HOME Screening Questionnaire (Coons, et al., 1981).

Sample.

Subjects consisted of five parents, three mothers and two fathers, from three families, who were Caucasian and low socioeconomic status as determined by family incomes. All were new Even Start program participants and each had two preschool-aged children; two families had children aged four years and younger and one family had a three-year-old and a five-month-old. Each family had at least one parent who scored below high school on an adult basic learning test. One father had a reading level of third grade.

Data collection.

Data from the sample mothers, which were interviews, observations during home visits and observations of storybook reading with their children, were collected at two intervals divided by an eight-week Even Start intervention time period. Intervention consisted of regularly scheduled home visits (weekly for some families and bi-monthly for others) by a trained professional parent educator. Visits averaged one and one-half hours in length and consisted of at least two literacy-related activities conducted by the parent educator with the oldest child.

Mothers observed and assisted with these activities. During

the course of the visit, parent educators answered parents' questions related to child development, learning, or health and discussed parents' education. Mothers and children also selected an average of five children's books to be used between Even Start visits and the parent educators gave parents specific tips about reading the books with the children.

Interviews with the fathers were conducted near the end of the intervention period. Sufficient comfort level with the family was necessary in order to access the fathers who were not generally present during regular Even Start home visits.

Data analysis.

For each subject in the study, data from the audiotaped interview transcripts were analyzed using a phenomenological approach that demanded identification of meaning units which were grouped and categorized according to similar and related meanings (Hycner, 1985). Common themes were subsequently derived from group clusters. Although some themes were derived from the interview questions, other themes emerged from the data.

The parent/child storybook reading sessions were coded according to quality of parent-child verbal interaction on a continuum of literacy involvement which was an adapted form of a coding system devised by Hoffman (1989). Intercoder reliability was determined for analyses of both the interview data and the storybook reading coding. It ranged from 85% agreement on the former to an average of 87.5% agreement with the storybook reading coding.

Results

Parent attitudes toward education.

All of the parents in the study valued education for themselves and their children. Parents hoped their children would achieve more education than they and one father said that he would be willing to work two jobs to put his stepson through college. The two families with four-year-old children took an active interest in the kindergarten screening and carefully observed their children being tested. They were able to report exactly how their children responded to different test items. It should be noted that this county's kindergarten screening procedure does not encourage parents to be present during the testing.

Even parents who had negative school experiences in their childhood and who had dropped out of school, voiced their desire to further their own education. Before Even Start intervention, two of the parents initiated adult education; one was enrolled in a vocational school and the other self-referred to Even Start for assistance to complete the GED. Two other parents expressed their intent to enroll in vocational education but were postponing because the mother wished to wait until their children entered school. The father in this family worked long hours which prohibited school attendance.

Even Start intervention encouraged the father with the lowest reading level (third grade) to re-enroll in a reading program and he maintained interest and attendance throughout the intervention

period. This father had given up on several prior attempts to return to school.

Role of teacher.

In the initial data collection, each parent in the study acknowledged that they made efforts to teach their children. Mothers gave examples of cooking; fathers mentioned learning the names of tools and all had begun to teach the alphabet and color recognition to the children. Before intervention, the parents did not readily label themselves as "teachers" of their children. One mother verbally denied that she was a teacher. However, her response was "I try to do what normal moms would do." Three other parents, two fathers and one mother, also did not use the label of "teacher". Only one mother confidently acknowledged that she was a teacher of her children.

The intervention seemed to boost parental confidence. Before intervention, there was low reporting of specific teaching activities. After intervention, all of the mothers readily gave examples of their "teaching" behavior. Two mothers increased their recognition of "teachable moments" in ordinary family routines and they explained how they were using household objects (such as straws) to teach their children numbers and colors. Another mother adopted the label of "teacher" with none of the hesitancy she had expressed prior to intervention.

Literacy teaching experiences.

Before intervention

At the first data collection, a surprising number and variety

of literacy activities occurred in these families' homes. Two of the mothers reported reading to their babies during pregnancy. One read high school history texts to promote intelligence in the baby and the second read because she wanted her baby to hear her voice.

All of the parents read books with their children, the mothers more frequently and more regularly than the fathers. However, at the first data collection the bookreading was not a routinized family activity and ranged from three to five times per week. Two parents (one couple) reported only reading when the child asked.

A variety of environmental print was available in the homes, including adult and children's books, popular magazines and calendars. Two of the families subscribed to children's book clubs. Two mothers collected recipes and one mother used craft books. One father read auto magazines.

To varying degrees the families provided their children opportunities for drawing and writing activities, and parents purchased commercial products to promote literacy which included flash cards and coloring books. One family bought games to promote child learning and one mother reported she selected only those toys that had "learning" value such as a telephone and push toys for her child when he was young.

Also before intervention, the father with third grade reading used computer software to teach his daughter alphabet recognition, although he became easily frustrated when she wouldn't work with the program for the period of time he wanted. This discouraged him from doing anything else with his daughter.

The two parents with the youngest children reported making collages from magazines with their son. Parents also reported talking with their children during daily family routines and one mother mentioned discussions with her daughter after a children's television show. Two of the families used children's audiocassette tapes with accompanying books and two families used the computer with their children.

After Even Start intervention

The study revealed some changes after Even Start intervention. By the second data collection, the study mothers increased their awareness of the link between family literacy activities and formal reading and writing acquisition. One mother explained to the researcher that a pattern game that she played with her daughter was preparing her for reading. Families also incorporated more rote learning activities such as number and color recognition. All families increased their children's literacy experiences by doing more activities with their children such as drawing and talking with the child about colors, numbers and letters. More variety was introduced into the family activities such as fingerpainting and puzzles.

All reported more storybook reading; bedtime reading became more of a regular family routine. The fathers became more involved by increasing their reading with their children. They preferred books they enjoyed as children such as the "Curious George" series. The father with low reading ability became more confident in teaching the alphabet to his daughter and in addition to computer

software, devised more strategies such as letter tracing to help her recognize and write letters. He expressed more patience with her work with him on the computer and bragged about her accomplishments.

Structured teaching.

A notable finding was the effort that parents made to teach certain skills they perceived were preparation for school. By the second data collection, all of the parents were actively trying to teach their children rote knowledge such as number, color and alphabet recognition. In addition, the mothers focused on teaching their children their full name and personal knowledge such as address and telephone number. They also began emotionally preparing the children for school by defining what happens in school in pleasant anticipation of learning new things. All of the mothers and one father had specific plans for learning activities for their children the summer before they entered school.

Expanded Comfort with Educators.

By the second data collection mothers exhibited a high comfort level with school professionals as evidenced by their discussions about meetings with teachers and school officials for kindergarten entrance. One family's daughter had been diagnosed with a behavioral disorder and she met with the special education teacher on more than one occasion. One mother actively lobbied for early kindergarten entrance for her child. She advocated to have her daughter re-tested for early admittance because she had observed the testing and felt the examiner did not give credence to a

particular test item response. She had been told that her daughter missed passing the test by a point or two.

Childrearing Practices.

An important difference after the intervention was on childrearing practices. Two mothers initially stated quite frankly that they had "little patience with their children". These were the same mothers who had lower self-confidence as themselves as teachers. After intervention they both cited improvement of their parenting skills as a result of learning from the Even Start parent educator. They said that the parent educator provided a model for them of how to interact with the children. One mother said she was learning how to deal with her frustration when teaching her children.

Parent-Child Storybook Reading.

Changes were indicated in the quality of mother/child storybook reading behavior after intervention. Two mothers improved their children's involvement during book reading (see tables 1 and 2). They increased the number of interrogation and follow-up questions and increased in story expansion to the children's previous knowledge and experiences. They provided more informative comments and comments inviting child elaboration of the story. Changes were also noted in the use of dramatic voice effects to promote children's interest. A second bookreading session could not be accomplished with the third mother because of a non-compliant child.

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Table 1

Storybook Reading Continuum

Parent 2

	Number of Responses	
	Session 1	Session 2 *
A. Parent-initiated questions		
A. Interrogation questions ("yes/no" response)	5	2
B. Interrogation questions ("short" answer")	6	5
C. Follow-up questions (enabling clarification)	4	11
D. Invitation questions (expand story, relate to previous experiences)	7	7
B. Parent-initiated statements		
A. Insistence comments (demand "right" response)	0	3
B. Directive comments (telling what or how to do)	2	6
C. Informative comments (provide explanations)	7	11
D. Invitation comments (encourage elaboration)	1	6
E. Supportive comments (accepting personal decision-making)	0	2
C. Parent responses to child		
A. Ignores child's verbalizations	0	0
B. Corrects or rejects child's verbalizations	1	1
C. Controls child's efforts	1	0
D. Provides additional information	8	8
E. Confirms predictions or elaboration	2	2
F. Values and supports child's questions or comments, praise	7	9
G. Promotes further elaboration or prediction	1	1

*Note: Session 1 was before intervention. Session 2 was after intervention.

Table 2

Storybook Reading Continuum

Parent 3

	Number of Responses	
	Session 1	Session 2 *
A. Parent-initiated questions		
A. Interrogation questions ("yes/no" response)	4	1
B. Interrogation questions ("short" answer")	7	26
C. Follow-up questions (enabling clarification)	1	3
D. Invitation questions (expand story, relate to previous experiences)	0	9
B. Parent-initiated statements		
A. Insistence comments (demand "right" response)	1	2
B. Directive comments (telling what or how to do)	0	0
C. Informative comments (provide explanations)	1	2
D. Invitation comments (encourage elaboration)	0	4
E. Supportive comments (accepting personal decision-making)	0	0
C. Parent responses to child		
A. Ignores child's verbalizations	0	0
B. Corrects or rejects child's verbalizations	0	1
C. Controls child's efforts	1	0
D. Provides additional information	0	5
E. Confirms predictions or elaboration	0	1
F. Values and supports child's questions or comments, praise	1	13
G. Promotes further elaboration or prediction	0	0

*Note: Session 1 was before intervention. Session 2 was after intervention.

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Discussion and Implications

The study's results coincide with those of others (Teale, 1986 and Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) who have found that low educated parents value education and provide multiple literacy learning experiences for their children. These parents were aware of the importance of providing books and drawing and writing experiences in the preschool years. Even before intervention, they recognized their responsibility to provide early learning experiences for their children and had positive attitudes toward literacy learning.

Although the parents studied realized to a certain degree that they had an influence on their children's learning, they needed encouragement and clarification of the benefits of their efforts and of their role as teacher. They had incorporated the cultural expectations of teaching rote knowledge to their children in order to prepare for school but had limited confidence in their self-efficacy with their children. With the help of the Even Start educators, each of the parents seemed to gain confidence and understanding that their efforts were preparing their children for later reading and school work. The Even Start intervention also helped parents expand their repertoire of activities to promote literacy in their children as well as provided more books for family use.

Inhibited self-efficacy was also revealed in the two mothers' statements that they lacked patience with their children. These parents benefitted from the modelling provided by the home educator. In particular the modelling of bookreading with children

helped the mothers incorporate more child involvement in their bookreading and thus made it a richer literacy experience for their children.

These parents had aspirations for advancing their own education and the Even Start program facilitated their enrollment in programs that met their needs. In particular, the program encouraged parents with previous failures to return to adult education. As Brizius and Foster (1993) have noted, the intergenerational literacy model fosters parents' education as well as the children's.

A particularly interesting finding was the increased father involvement in literacy activities. These married couples followed the traditional stereotypic roles where the mother assumed primary responsibility for the preschool-aged children. However, the fathers expressed concern for the education of their children. With Even Start intervention fathers increased their bookreading with the children. This has direct implications for program planners who need to assure that they do not exclude fathers from their program target. The fathers in the study used literacy in their particular interest area (one was car repair and another computers).

The home-based delivery model worked well with these families who would not have availed themselves of formal group programs. For parents who have uncertainties about how to act in public or in small groups, the home-based approach may make it easier for them to be more receptive to learning. In their own homes, these

parents appeared to let down their guard and sought answers to such sensitive questions as spanking of children. The parent educators reinforced parent attempts at teaching by commenting on child art displays and helped parents understand how to use specific toys and books in the home to promote child learning. This approach also helped the parent educators customize their teaching for particular family needs. They provided information and activities with the particular family in mind.

Family education programs need to examine ways to clarify the natural teaching that occurs in homes. The teaching of simple rote skills was an easily adopted activity for these parents. What did not occur in this particular Even Start intervention was the clarification for parents that teaching occurs during informal interactions with the children such as playing, conversations, cooking and other chores. Although these parents did exhibit many informal teaching behaviors, they were never overtly recognized by the Even Start educators.

A potential long-term benefit of this early intervention program is the increased comfort level of parents with classroom teachers and possibly increased parent involvement with school. During the program the home educators were labelled as "teachers" and after the short intervention, the parents's comfort level with education professionals was raised. These parents looked forward to school entrance and viewed school positively. Henderson and Berla (1994) found after reviewing numerous studies of school achievement that parent involvement and positive parent-teacher

relationships contributes to children's school achievement. It is likely that the Even Start program set the stage for a positive relationship between these parents and the school. Teachers need to continue fostering these parents' interest and efforts to promote their children's learning. Lastly, family educators should view all family members as learners and design flexible programs which recognize family strengths and needs.

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